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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001910

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL YE DOMESTIC POLITICS

SUBJECT: SALEH CELEBRATES HIS 27TH WITH PANACHE AND SAYS HE WON'T RUN AGAIN!

Classified By: CDA NABEEL KHOURY FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary:

1 (U) The diplomatic community was invited, along with Yemen's political establishment, to help President Saleh celebrate his 27th year in office. Sandwiched between a long receiving line and a cake and toast-fest guests were treated to a vintage Saleh speech replete with "frank" talk to Opposition parties, media and the diplomatic community. Saleh asked the opposition not to think like foes to the regime; he asked the media to be more responsible and the diplomatic community not to intervene in Yemen's internal affairs. The highlight of the speech came when he suddenly asserted that he would not run for another term as President. End Summary.

I respect you, but don't push it!

12. (U) After shaking hands with his several hundred well-wishers, Saleh gave a speech which started predictably with remarks on the history of the country, the revolution and the struggle for unity between north and south. Saleh then quickly jumped to the matter at hand, the current state of affairs in the country. Saleh asserted that Yemen's democracy and pluralism course was set by Yemenis for Yemenis and took root before any "foreigner" tried to impose it from outside. In that vein, said Saleh, the idea of freedom of expression and organization was genuine but had to be properly defined. "Free expression does not mean the freedom to curse and malign people. The media must be responsible and know its limits." As for the opposition, Saleh counseled, "I respect you. You are the other face of the government and the state. By all means, oppose and run for office, but don't think of yourselves as foes of the state or the ruling party. You have a responsibility for what happens here. You are our partners."

You Can't Leave Us!

13. (U) Clearly departing from his text, Saleh asked that the opposition be encouraged to run for the highest office and to help build a new generation of leaders in the country. Indeed, Saleh added, "I will not run for another term in office. I will complete my constitutional duties to the fullest and then make room for others to lead this country." Saleh was barely allowed to finish his sentence before being interrupted by groans and moans from the Yemeni side of the room. Amidst shouts of "No, this can't be," one Qabili stood up and gave an impassioned plea for Saleh to reconsider, saying, "You can't leave us, we will support you and be by your side forever!"

14. Ominously, Saleh made several "don't interfere in our internal affairs" remarks to the foreign diplomats in the audience. Directing himself to democracy building programs in the country, Saleh said, "We accept your advice but not your interference." Giving a specific example of "a group that recently met in Hadramout to discuss tribal revenge killing" - (a reference that seemed aimed at a U.S. Embassy supported program) Saleh said, "I say to the foreign community keep your activities channeled through our ministry of foreign affairs. Deal with NGOs but only those already established and recognized by us. Don't start your own NGOs here."

Comment:

15. (C) CDA canvassed other foreign diplomats and a few ROYG contacts, during the reception that followed the speech, for their reactions. Consensus was that the President was being coy and certainly was not serious about not running for office in 2006. His courting of the opposition, almost in the same breath as saying he won't run, was according to some, a clear appeal for the opposition to nominate him for another term in office, as they did the last time around. As for his warning against interference in Yemen's internal affairs, one of our ROYG contacts said, "don't worry, someone probably

whispered that one in his ear prior to his speech and he felt he had to throw it in." Islah leader, Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar, has over the past several months protested the "free movement of American and western diplomats around the country, in a way that constituted interference in Yemen's internal affairs." Saleh's need to woo al-Ahmar away from a serious challenge for the Presidency may indeed explain his remarks on foreign intervention. In the end, a vintage Saleh speech and performance, but no real policy departures on this, the 27th anniversary of Saleh's reign. End comment.
Khoury